

Edo North: Refugium and micro-accretion zone

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High altitude locations continue to draw attention to complex relationships between geography and language (Nichols 1992, Urban 2020), although landform configuration also requires attention (Huisman, Majid and van Hout 2019). Across Africa, macro-areas not necessarily of high altitude have been identified (Güldemann 2010, 2011); micro-areas much less so (Good 2013). For this paper we assess Edo North, a micro-area stretching over 750 km² in south-central Nigeria that is dominated by the Igarra Formation. It shows outcrops of Cretaceous rock shaped as whaleback domes and tors reaching 2100 FASL at central point relative to 90-100 immediately north at Niger-Benue confluence and south in transition rainforest/savanna (Hockey et al. 1986). Its perimeter reveals river ways on east (Niger) and west (Osse), while additional waterways flow through the center (Onyami) or along expanses in north (Ubo) and south (Orle-Edion). Across 180+ villages some 20 odd Edoid languages of contrasting phonological and morphosyntactic character are spoken, while near central highpoint is the Ebira variety of Nupoid. Language density in upland areas, by one count (Lewis 2015), approximates 1 per 12 km². Along a 40 km path from central point northward to the Qsoso escarpment there are six distinct Edoid languages, several in adjacent villages. Across northern stretches Uneme-speaking iron-smiths occupy or share villages at escarpment entry ways. Their vernaculars align with rainforest Edoid farther south. No lingua franca of indigenous origin dominates, although multilingualism is prevalent, and since 1960 Nigerian Pidgin has expanded.

Linguistic features in Edo North distribute asymmetrically, with significant east-west and north-south dimensions. Phonologically we find near its center a complex array of consonants not otherwise found in Edoid, including liquids and nasals with fortis/lenis or breathy voice phonation type (Elugbe 1989). Oral vowels dominate, although nasal vowels occur at western and southern edges, seemingly under Yoruba influence. Tone systems contrast high vs. low, with downstep addition in more southerly areas and mid tone west of center. Morphosyntactically, nominal form classes marked by singular/plural prefixes prevail upland, defining up to 25 declension sets. Restricted to the same northern uplands is agreement by prefix within noun and verb phrase. Although basic Swadesh-type collections support Edoid status (Elugbe 1973, Lewis 2013), lexical variation typifies key land-related terms (HILL/MOUNTAIN (*égè/étè*, *ókò/íkhóshè*, *ókpa/ákpàké*, *ónà*) and STONE (*ésè/éfè*, *údò/údù*, *égbà*, *irásìà*), less so for RIVER (*úkè/óke*, *édà/édè*, *óbò*) and least for TREE (*ékà/éhā*) and WATER (*àmè*). As for their distribution, three geographically-defined routes of dispersal are identifiable. One extends from northeast uplands via central point to the Onyami River then directly west for HILL/MOUNTAIN *égè/étè*, RIVER

úkè/ókè, and STONE éṣè/éfè. A second extends along the southern Orle-Edion river complex for HILL/MOUNTAIN ókò/íkhóshè, RIVER édà/édè, and STONE údò/údù. A third, confined to northwest and central uplands, holds for HILL/MOUNTAIN ónà, RIVER óbò, and STONE ìrásà. We conclude by considering how lexical distributions along with oral tradition favor Edoid migration from the northeast toward the southwest prior to slave raiding disruptions of the 1800s and earlier.

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